REVIVAL AND GLOBALIZATION OF KANTHA EMBROIDERY: A FEMININE CULTURAL IDENTITY IN INDIAN FASHION INDUSTRY

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Abstract

3. Kantha embroidery, a heritage craft deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of Bengal, has long served as a medium of feminine expression, storytelling, and resourceful creativity. Traditionally practiced by rural women using old textiles, Kantha was not only an act of recycling but also a form of silent documentation — narrating life experiences, folklore, and emotions through stitches. In recent decades, Kantha has experienced a significant transformation—from a traditional household embroidery practice to an acclaimed art form now integrated into modern fashion trends.
4. This research explores how Kantha has transitioned from local tradition to global recognition, and how this journey reflects both the resilience of Indian crafts and the empowerment of women artisans. It delves into the socio-economic impact of Kantha revival projects, collaborations with designers, and its growing presence in international fashion platforms. The paper also interprets Kantha as a visual language—a feminine literature of threads—that reflects regional identity, ecological awareness, and cultural memory.
5. This paper, through qualitative research, artisan interviews, and real-life case studies, reveals how Kantha embroidery is more than just a visual craft. It serves as a voice for rural women and represents a conscious move toward sustainability within India's growing global fashion landscape.

Keywords: *Kantha Revival, Feminine Expression, Indian Fashion Industry, Cultural Identity, Globalization of Crafts*.

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INTRODUCTION

India's textile and embroidery traditions are a living repository of cultural expression, heritage, and storytelling. Among the many crafts practiced across the subcontinent, Kantha embroidery from West Bengal stands out for its rich legacy of transformation — Evolving from a modest household tradition practiced by rural women, Kantha has emerged as a globally acknowledged artistic expression within the fashion world. Grounded in principles of sustainability, resourcefulness, and emotional storytelling, it transcends mere stitching—it becomes a symbolic thread of memory, identity, and women's empowerment.

The term 'Kantha' refers to both the running stitch technique and the finished embroidered quilt traditionally made from layers of discarded saris. Historically, it was an art form practiced primarily by women in Bengal as a means to recycle old textiles while also narrating personal stories, myths, and daily life scenes through intricate stitchwork. Over time, what began as utilitarian craft evolved into a powerful symbol of feminine creativity and resilience.

Over the past years, the resurgence and integration of Kantha embroidery into the mainstream have been supported by collaborative efforts from NGOs, governmental initiatives, fashion professionals, and academic institutions. This revival, particularly under initiatives like Rural Craft and Cultural Hubs (RCCH) and international design collaborations, has brought Kantha to runways, exhibitions, and luxury fashion spaces, both in India and abroad. It has created opportunities for thousands of women artisans, especially in rural Bengal, providing them with livelihood, identity, and socio-economic agency.

At the same time, this transformation has raised new questions — how is the authenticity of Kantha maintained in its globalized form? What socio-cultural tensions arise when a community-based craft enters elite fashion markets? And how does Kantha continue to serve as a vehicle for women's empowerment in contemporary India?

This study aims to explore these layers — from tradition to modernity, from marginalization to visibility, and from sustainability to commercialization — through the lens of Kantha embroidery's journey in the fashion industry.

Figure 1: Handmade Kantha Embroidery Piece

Source: Photograph by the author during filed visit to Nanoor, Birbhum District, West Bengal (2025)

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM / RESEARCH GAP

While the revival of Kantha embroidery has garnered attention from art historians, fashion designers, and cultural scholars, there remains a notable gap in understanding its intersection with women's empowerment and sustainable development in the fashion industry. Most existing literature tends to either focus on Kantha's aesthetic evolution or its commercial adaptation, often overlooking its socio-cultural impact on the lives of the rural women artisans who sustain this craft.

Additionally, the visual and symbolic language embedded in Kantha has not been fully analysed through the lens of gender studies, cultural identity, and global fashion dialogues. There is a lack of comprehensive research that bridges traditional textile art, female agency, and the mechanisms of the contemporary fashion market. Furthermore, minimal scholarly attention has been given to the environmental aspect of Kantha practices — especially its origins in recycling and upcycling old fabrics — which aligns with the current discourse on eco-fashion and climate responsibility.

Moreover, there is insufficient investigation into how Kantha artisans navigate power hierarchies and market dynamics when their community-based knowledge systems enter global, elite fashion spaces. The role of digital media, design collaborations, and e-commerce platforms in transforming the identity and livelihood of Kantha artisans has also not been systematically examined.

Therefore, this research seeks to fill these critical gaps by exploring how Kantha, as both an artistic and economic practice, contributes to the empowerment of women, sustains cultural identity, and adapts meaningfully within a globalized, sustainability-conscious fashion ecosystem. In doing so, the study aims to generate interdisciplinary insights that connect craft revival, gender empowerment, and environmental ethics in the broader context of climate-conscious and socially responsible fashion.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To trace the historical evolution of Kantha embroidery from a domestic craft to a recognized textile art form in contemporary fashion.

2. To examine the role of women artisans in sustaining and reviving Kantha traditions, particularly in the context of rural Bengal.

3. To analyse the socio-economic impact of Kantha embroidery on women's empowerment, livelihood generation, and community development.

4. To explore the use of Kantha as a medium of recycled and upcycled fashion, contributing to sustainable and environmentally responsible design practices.

5. To investigate how Kantha has been integrated into modern fashion and global markets while retaining its cultural essence.

6. To identify the challenges and opportunities involved in balancing tradition, commercial viability, and sustainability within the Kantha ecosystem.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Historical and Cultural Roots:

Scholars such as Kumari et al. (2024) have highlighted Kantha's origins as a domestic embroidery tradition in Bengal, where women recycled old sarees and dhotis into layered quilts using intricate running stitches. These motifs often expressed personal stories, local folklore, and natural surroundings such as flora and fauna. Initially serving a practical purpose, Kantha has over time transformed into a sophisticated art form that embodies both traditional skills and cultural heritage.

Gender and Empowerment:

Scholars such as Palit and Debnath (2022) have emphasized how Kantha embroidery has become a pivotal source of livelihood for rural women, especially in regions like Nanoor, West Bengal. Through sustained support from NGOs, design institutes like NIFT, and government initiatives, women artisans have improved their socio-economic status, gained financial independence, and become key contributors to the rural economy. Their transformation from homemakers to income generators highlights Kantha as not only a craft but also a tool for empowerment and economic regeneration.

Kantha in Sustainable Fashion:

According to Bardhan and Bhattacharya (2022), Kantha embroidery, deeply embedded in the cultural traditions of Bengal, exemplifies the values of sustainable fashion. Their study presents Kantha as a living tradition that has evolved through the upcycling of old textiles, thereby reducing waste and fostering ethical production practices. They emphasize how Kantha has not only empowered rural women through creative livelihoods but also contributed to the slow fashion movement by prioritizing handcrafted, environmentally responsible products. The craft's alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reinforces its role in building community resilience and promoting a circular economy.

Market Integration and Globalization:

Biswas and Roy (2011) explore the Kantha production ecosystem in Santiniketan, offering valuable insights into the prospects and difficulties encountered by women artisans involved in the craft. Their study reveals that while Kantha products have found markets among domestic elites and foreign tourists, the women artisans often receive

disproportionately low returns for their labour. Despite the global interest and rising prices of Kantha products, artisans remain at the lower end of the value chain. The lack of institutionalized marketing systems, limited socio-cultural mobility, and inadequate market linkages pose significant barriers. However, the study also notes latent entrepreneurial potential among artisans, which, if supported through targeted interventions, could enhance their economic agency and participation in broader markets.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research design to explore the socio-cultural, environmental, and economic impact of Kantha embroidery, with special reference to its revival and transformation in the modern fashion industry.

Data Collection Methods

1. Primary Data:

Field Visits: Observations and documentation of Kantha production units in West Bengal (particularly Birbhum and Bolpur-Santiniketan areas).

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with women artisans, NGO leaders (e.g., from Banglanatak.com), fashion designers, and local cooperatives.

Visual Documentation: Photographs and sketches of traditional and contemporary Kantha designs.

2. Secondary Data:

Review of published literature, government reports, and NGO documents related to Kantha, women empowerment, and sustainable fashion.

Examining fashion publications, textile fairs, and digital repositories.

Sampling Method

Purposive sampling has been used to select participants (women artisans and stakeholders) based on their involvement in the Kantha revival process. A sample of approximately 20–30 artisans from different regions of West Bengal has been considered.

Tools and Techniques for Analysis

Thematic Analysis: Identifying recurring themes related to empowerment, sustainability, and artistic expression from the interviews and observations.

Visual Analysis: Interpreting the motifs, stitches, and narrative elements present in Kantha works from an art-historical and cultural lens.

Comparative Study: Comparing traditional Kantha pieces with their modern adaptations in fashion to assess continuity and change.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to participation, the research intent was explained to all individuals. Their consent was taken before interviews or documentation. Anonymity has been maintained where requested.

Limitations of the Methodology

The findings are specific to West Bengal and may not reflect practices in other regions.

The data is qualitative and context-specific; hence generalizations are limited.

REVIVAL OF KANTHA EMBROIDERY: HISTORICAL TO CONTEMPORARY

The Kantha embroidery tradition has deep roots in the cultural fabric of Bengal, tracing back to ancient times when women repurposed old sarees and dhotis into functional quilts and shawls for domestic use. This humble practice, born out of necessity and thrift, evolved into a deeply expressive form of folk art that narrates personal stories, religious themes, and everyday life.

The revival of Kantha began prominently in the 1970s and 1980s, as part of a broader movement to recognize and preserve India's intangible cultural heritage. Shamlu Dudeja, among other visionaries, played an essential role in reviving Kantha by establishing self-supporting artisan collectives, hosting public showcases, and introducing the embroidery to urban markets. Her initiatives helped transform Kantha from a utilitarian domestic practice into a commercially viable art form. Around the same period, state and non-governmental efforts such as the West Bengal Government's collaboration with UNESCO on the Rural Craft and Cultural Hubs (RCCH) project further institutionalized the promotion of Kantha embroidery.

In contemporary times, the revival of Kantha has also been driven by its adaptation to modern fashion and lifestyle products, making it more visible on global platforms. Kantha has been embraced by both Indian and international designers, featuring in collections ranging from haute couture to sustainable fashion. Workshops and training centres in rural Bengal, often led by women artisans, now focus not only on traditional motifs but also on innovation to suit modern tastes, thereby expanding the scope and resilience of the craft. The transformation of Kantha from an intimate form of storytelling to a commercially valued textile art stands as a noteworthy example of successful craft revitalization. It showcases how tradition can be preserved and innovated simultaneously, while also empowering artisans, particularly women, at the grassroots level.

Figure 2: Discussion with "Kantha Didi" about Design Intricacies at Nanoor District, West Bengal

Source: Filed documentation by the researcher, 2025.

(Image courtesy: Mr. Abhishek Sengupta, Artisan & Activist, Birbhum Artisani, West Bengal)

GLOBALIZATION OF KANTHA IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

In today's interconnected world, Kantha embroidery has extended beyond its regional identity and now plays a meaningful role in the international fashion landscape. What was once a domestic, localized craft confined to rural Bengal has now found expression on international runways, in luxury fashion lines, and in the wardrobes of conscious consumers across the world.

Several factors have contributed to this globalization:

1. Integration with Contemporary Fashion:

Both Indian and international designers have adopted Kantha for its visual charm, as well as for its eco-friendly and artisanal qualities. Fashion labels such as Sabyasachi Mukherjee, Anavila, Bappaditya Das, and others have incorporated Kantha in their collections, presenting it in a global context while retaining its cultural essence.

2. Sustainable Fashion Movement:

With rising global concerns over fast fashion and environmental degradation, Kantha – with its roots in recycling and upcycling – naturally aligns with sustainable fashion principles. This makes it particularly appealing to global brands that prioritize eco-consciousness, ethical sourcing, and slow fashion.

3. Artisan Collaborations and Fair Trade:

NGOs, cooperatives, and craft-based enterprises such as Sasha, RASA, and AIACA have collaborated with international brands to ensure fair wages and exposure for rural women artisans. These partnerships have helped Kantha products reach markets in Europe, the USA, and Japan.

4. Online Marketplaces and E-commerce:

Platforms like Etsy, Okhai, Jaypore, and Amazon Handmade have made Kantha products easily accessible to global consumers. Social media and digital storytelling have also played a vital role in showcasing the narratives behind the stitches, enhancing emotional and cultural value for international buyers.

5. International Recognition and Awards:

Indian artisans and fashion designers promoting Kantha have received international accolades, such as the International Wool mark Prize and UNESCO Seal of Excellence. These acknowledgments further legitimize Kantha's place on the global fashion map.

6. Cultural Fusion and Hybrid Designs:

The fusion of Kantha with Western silhouettes – such as jackets, skirts, and handbags – has opened new possibilities in global design aesthetics. These hybrid products cater to international tastes while preserving the authenticity of the embroidery.

Figure 3: Kantha in Contemporary Global Fashion

(**Source:** AI-generated by the author using Meta AI, 2025)

FEMININE CULTURAL IDENTITY AND VISUAL LANGUAGE

Kantha embroidery is more than a craft-it's a deeply rooted feminine expression in Bengal, where women conveyed personal stories and social realities through meditative stitches on old saris or dhotis. Motifs like birds, lotuses, and domestic scenes formed a visual language of emotions, aspirations, and roles. Emerging from the domestic sphere, Kantha evolved as a distinctly female narrative art.

Today, it serves as a visual archive of womanhood, touching themes of agency, empowerment, and identity. Though global fashion has embraced Kantha, many designers overlook its socio-cultural depth. Through each stitch, the woman becomes both narrator and artist, bridging heritage with modern design and asserting her voice within a patriarchal structure.

Figure 4: Women Artisans Engaged in Group Kantha Stitching Work

Source: Photograph by the author during filed visit to Nanoor, Birbhum District, West Bengal (2025)

CASE STUDIES / DESIGNER COLLABORATIONS / FIELD EXAMPLES

1. Designer Ritu Kumar and the Revival of Kantha (1970s–80s)

One of the first Indian designers to incorporate Kantha into mainstream fashion, Ritu Kumar recognized the artistic and cultural value of this embroidery. In collaboration with rural artisans, she helped revive traditional Kantha techniques and showcased them in her collections, giving them a platform on national and international runways. Her work highlighted how Kantha could be elevated beyond household use into couture and bridal fashion.

2. International Wool mark Prize (2014) – Designer Rahul Mishra

Rahul Mishra’s award-winning collection at the 2014 International Wool mark Prize featured hand embroidery inspired by traditional Indian techniques including Kantha. His minimalist yet intricately embroidered designs garnered global attention, reinforcing the idea that indigenous crafts like Kantha could be integrated seamlessly into contemporary fashion with international appeal.

3. Rural Craft and Cultural Hub (RCCH), West Bengal

Under the collaboration between Banglanatak dot com and the Department of MSME&T, Government of West Bengal, the RCCH project has empowered over 12,000 rural women Kantha artisans. These women have formed self-help groups and collectives, participated in international fairs (like Santa Fe Folk Art

Market), and engaged in direct dialogue with designers and buyers, thereby ensuring sustainable livelihood and global outreach.

4. Kantha in Global Luxury Brands

Brands like Anavila, Sabyasachi, and Bodice have incorporated Kantha motifs into luxury apparel and accessories, often marketed as sustainable and artisanal. For instance, Sabyasachi's collections often feature vintage Kantha-inspired details on lehengas and dupattas, blending heritage with luxury fashion. However, this also raises concerns about cultural appropriation vs. authentic collaboration with artisans.

5. Field Observation – Artisan Narratives

During fieldwork in districts like Birbhum District, Bolpur and Nanoor, many women shared how Kantha has transformed their identity from housewives to entrepreneurs. They discussed how motifs from their lives—rural scenes, dreams of daughters' education, or domestic rituals—found voice in their stitches. This transformation from creator to communicator is a central pillar in Kantha's continuing relevance.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

1. Cultural Continuity and Reinvention

Kantha has successfully preserved its cultural motifs and narrative storytelling, while also adapting to contemporary aesthetics. This reinvention has allowed artisans to retain authenticity while catering to modern consumer preferences. The use of recycled fabrics and symbolic stitching patterns continues to reflect the personal and collective memory of Bengali women.

2. Economic Empowerment of Women

In regions as Birbhum, Bolpur, and Murshidabad, Kantha embroidery has emerged as a crucial livelihood option for women living in rural areas. Participation in self-help groups and cooperatives such as Ranga sutra or Sasha has led to increased financial independence, decision-making power, and community leadership.

3. Designer-Artisan Collaborations

Notable collaborations with designers such as Anavila Misra, Gaurang Shah, and labels like Biswa Bangla have helped in elevating the craft from domestic handwork to high fashion. These partnerships often focus on co-creation, design training, and ethical sourcing.

4. Sustainability and Ethical Appeal

Kantha's inherent use of upcycled materials aligns with the global sustainability movement in fashion. It appeals to conscious consumers looking for ethical and handcrafted alternatives. This eco-conscious appeal is increasingly being leveraged by brands in their marketing strategies.

5. Global Recognition and Market Expansion

The global interest in Kantha is on the rise, reflected in its showcasing at international events and across various online platforms. Indian diasporic communities and global fashion curators have played a key role in making Kantha a part of luxury and boutique segments in cities like Paris, London, and New York.

6. Challenges in Standardization and Mass Production

While Kantha is gaining momentum globally, artisans face challenges related to quality standardization, timely production, market accessibility, and competition with machine embroidery. Some artisans feel the creative autonomy is reduced under brand-led processes.

7. Symbolism and Visual Language

The study reveals that traditional Kantha motifs—such as the lotus, fish, peacock, and the tree of life—still embody the essence of womanhood by narrating their rituals, daily experiences, emotions, and aspirations through symbolic imagery. This visual vocabulary contributes to the identity and continuity of women's oral and textile traditions.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

Challenges:

1. Cultural Appropriation and Misrepresentation:

When international fashion brands adopt traditional Indian crafts like Kantha, they often detach the craft from its cultural roots and represent it merely as a trend or aesthetic. As a result, the true spirit of the craft and the narratives rooted in its cultural legacy begin to fade away.

2. Mass Production vs. Handmade Authenticity:

Due to global demand, Kantha is increasingly being adapted for machine production, which compromises the originality and quality of handmade artistry. Such changes threaten the preservation of traditional artisan methods and expertise.

3. Lack of Recognition and Economic Benefit for Artisans:

Even though the price of Kantha-based products rises in international markets, the artisans often do not receive adequate credit or compensation. In many cases, they are deprived of both recognition and fair wages.

4. Limited Access to Global Markets:

Local women artisans lack access to tools such as e-commerce, international exhibitions, and networking platforms, which could help them connect directly with global customers.

Opportunities:

1. Sustainable and Slow Fashion Movement:

As the global fashion industry is moving toward environmental responsibility, techniques like Kantha, based on reuse and recycling, are becoming highly relevant and in demand. They offer traditional and sustainable alternatives to global consumers.

2. Women Empowerment through Global Collaborations:

International organizations, NGOs, and designers are providing global platforms to women artisans engaged in Kantha, which is enhancing their self-reliance and improving their social and economic status.

3. Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power:

Kantha can serve as a cultural ambassador, representing India’s heritage and craftsmanship on the global stage, thereby strengthening India’s cultural image worldwide.

4. Digital Platforms and E-commerce:

Through the support of digital marketplaces including Jaypore, Etsy and Amazon Handmade, traditional Kantha creations are now reaching a broader, worldwide audience with greater ease. Social media is also playing a crucial role in bringing recognition to their work.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The present research highlights the evolving significance of Kantha embroidery, tracing its roots from a domestic craft to its recognition on international fashion platforms. The study emphasizes how Kantha not only serves as a medium of aesthetic expression but also acts as a powerful tool for socio-economic empowerment, especially for rural women in West Bengal. The study highlights the evolving journey of Kantha embroidery, showcasing how it has transitioned from being a craft of upcycled, hand-stitched quilts to becoming a contemporary fashion element. Today, Kantha enjoys recognition on global platforms, embraced by leading fashion designers and luxury brands for its cultural richness and aesthetic appeal. It reinforces the value of indigenous knowledge systems and traditional artistry in shaping a sustainable and inclusive future in fashion.

Suggestions:

1. Documentation and Archiving: Systematic documentation of regional variations and techniques of Kantha embroidery should be undertaken to preserve its traditional essence.

2. Design Innovation with Tradition: Designers and craft institutions should collaborate with artisans to create products that retain the traditional value of Kantha while appealing to modern markets.

3. Policy Support: Government and private organizations should provide training, financial aid, and infrastructure to rural artisans to scale up production while maintaining quality.

4. Sustainability and Global Appeal: Efforts must be made to position Kantha as a sustainable fashion choice in global markets, emphasizing its eco-friendly and handmade attributes.

5. Gender Inclusivity: While Kantha has traditionally been a women-centric craft, inclusive approaches involving all genders could expand its creative potential and reach.

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